

# THE ELEPHANT IN THE CLASSROOM: THE IMPACT OF MISBEHAVIOR ON CLASSROOM CLIMATE

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The research discussed here is based on a one year study of 34 second and fourth grade teachers and their 588 students. Data were collected in 40 minute observational segments; six unannounced observations took place in each teacher's classroom for a total of 240 minutes per teacher. The data were analyzed in SPSS as quantitative data. Half of the teachers were rated as strong by their principals and half were rated needs improvement by the same principals. The purpose of the study was to determine the differences in the way that instructional and non-instructional interactions took place between teachers and their students in these two types of classrooms. The results indicated that strong teachers interacted more with their students on instructional matters, and their students spent more time engaged in learning. The climate in the needs improvement classrooms were often characterized by the following cycle of behaviors 1) student misbehavior, 2) teacher's attempt to control the misbehavior, 3) student persistence in continued misbehavior, teacher retreating in frustration, and 4) an increase in student misbehavior. The conclusions provide steps that teacher educators can share with pre-service and in-service teachers to avoid this unfortunate cycle of behavior.

## Introduction

Classrooms are complex societies where students and teachers live and interact with each other. Teachers are the leaders of these societies and the way they exercise their leadership abilities greatly affect the quality of interactions that take place between teachers and students as well as the interactions that take place between and among the students themselves. These interactions, both social and instructional, have a great impact on the academic and social growth of the students assigned to a given teacher's classroom.

Educational scholars have suggested

for decades that the group dynamics of a classroom needs to be analyzed in order to fully understand how teachers best function in their role and how students best learn (Bracey, 2009a; Pianta, 2006; Eisner, 1984; Schlechty, 1976; Lortie, 1975; Jackson, 1968; Waller, 1961). Bracey (2009b) noted that educational research should focus on the way teachers and students interact and how teachers structure learning environments to promote these interactions. Research that focuses on how the average student or average teacher functions on an isolated task misses the significance of understanding how teach-

ers and students interact in the learning environment and how the internal relationships in a classroom impact both student and teacher behavior.

The purpose of this study was to conduct a comparative analysis in order to determine what life is like for students and teachers in classrooms where teachers have been categorized as strong by their principals vis-à-vis those classrooms where teachers have been categorized as needs improvement by the same principals. Specifically, the relationship existing between student and teacher interactions and student and teacher time-on-task was analyzed. The reported findings have significant implications for teacher educators who are guiding pre-service and in-service teachers in their development of productive learning environments.

#### **Review of Literature**

Teachers have varied opinions regarding what they believe are effective techniques for managing children's behavior in a classroom setting. In fact, classroom management may be the most discussed topic among teachers at all grade levels and career stages. A number of studies suggest that a direct link exists between teachers' ability to manage classroom behavior and their students' learning. For example, Baugous and Bendery (2000) suggested students are on task more in classrooms that have fewer management problems; it has been reported that such management problems tend to distract both teachers and students making it difficult for either to focus on learning experiences (Clough, Smassal, & Clough, 1994). Prater

(1992) reported, the optimal teaching and learning environment is one where the teacher puts an emphasis on preventing management disruptions because such an environment will likely increase student time-on-task and, of course, learning. Finally, Rimm-Kaufmann, La Paro, Downer, and Pianta (2005) found that high classroom quality was most consistently related to a low number of management problems.

Additionally, management problems can affect the amount and quality of interactions in the classroom. It has been reported that teachers are less apt to have positive interactions with behaviorally challenging students and even avoid contact with these students as stress levels increase (Abidin & Kmetz, 1997). Schlechty's classic work (1976) described a similar type of teacher behavior as retreating; that is, the teacher failed to react when students' violated previously written or stated rules for conduct.

#### **The Research Project**

Recently, the authors conducted a study to examine life in two distinctly different types of classrooms: those with teachers categorized as strong and those categorized as needs improvement. It is important to note that, during the data collection phase of this project, the researchers had no knowledge as to how the teachers had been categorized. Furthermore, visits were unannounced to ensure that teachers were unaware of the day or time that observations would take place. Thirty-four second and fourth grade teachers from ten public elementary schools in a rural South Car-

olina school district were selected to participate in this study. To be included in the study, a teacher must have taught a minimum of three years, completed a traditional college preparation program, and met NCLB standards for being highly qualified. The school district administration asked principals to use teacher annual evaluations, principal walk through observations, and student academic performance to categorize each teacher as either strong or needs improvement. Of the 17 second grade teachers, eight were categorized as strong and nine were categorized as needs improvement; 14 were Caucasian, three were African American, 16 were female, and one was male (a Caucasian). Of the 17 fourth grade teachers, nine were categorized as strong and eight were categorized as needs improvement; 12 were Caucasian, five were African American, and 17 were female.

A total of five hundred eighty-eight students had been assigned to the 34 teachers' classrooms. Of the 588 students, 49% were male, 51% female, 37% Caucasian, 58% African American, and 5% Hispanic. All classes were heterogeneously grouped; the principals assigned students randomly by gender and race; class sizes were equal within schools and varied from 13 to 21 across schools.

The researchers identified then operationalized specific teacher and student interactions by developing a coding system. The observers recorded the number and type of teacher and student interactions as well as time-on-task. The definitions of teacher and student interactions adhered to those outlined by

Schlechty (1976) and discussed by Hunt, Wiseman, & Touzel (2009). Teacher behavior was identified as either instruction- or management-focused. Those teacher behavior management interactions reported on here were coded as one of the following four categories: *teacher normative control*, when the teacher asked students to change their behavior; *teacher remunerative control*, when the teacher manipulated a reward system to control student behavior; *teacher coercion*, when the teacher used physical force, took away property or freedom, or threatened to do either; and *teacher retreatism*, when the teacher failed to react when students' violated previously written or stated rules for conduct.

The observers also completed five time-on-task scans during every 40 minute observation. The observers scanned the classroom from right to left noting the number of students obviously off-task. Students were considered on-task unless it was obvious to the observer that they were not attending to or involved in a learning experience. Time-on-task was recorded as a fraction designating the number of students off-task over the total number of students present during each scan.

### Procedures

Data for use in this study were collected during 40 minute observational segments in each classroom. Six observations took place in each of the thirty-four classrooms for a total of 240 minutes, or four hours, per classroom. The observations, conducted during the 2008-2009 school year were unannounced and sched-

uled throughout the day to capture the teachers' instruction of reading/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. Data from the observations were entered into SPSS as quantitative data for analysis. The data were analyzed to provide a description of what occurred during the classroom observation. In particular, the researchers analyzed the frequency of teacher and student interactions and the percentage of time students spent on-task.

### Findings

Differences between the climates in both types of classrooms were readily identifiable. For example, teachers characterized as strong interacted more frequently with their students, asked more questions, and, in general, created a more engaging, active climate than teachers characterized as needs improvement. The strong teachers' classrooms tended to be more productive places; instruction and learning remained the primary focus, and there were fewer instances of student misbehavior. In stark contrast, numerous instances of misbehavior were observed in the classrooms of teachers identified as needs improvement. For example, children were constantly sharpening pencils, talking with friends, pointlessly roaming the classroom, playing with rulers, crayons, and other materials, and arguing with the teacher. Thus, the researchers frequently observed a cycle dreaded by all teachers and characterized by 1) student misbehavior, 2) teacher's attempt to control misbehavior, 3) student persistence in continued misbehavior, 4) teacher retreating in frustration, and 5) an increase in student

misbehavior. Teachers spent more time managing behavior and less time teaching; as a result, they focused less on content focused instruction. Jennings & Greenberg (2009) found this cycle of behavior may lead to high levels of teacher frustration and burnout.

Significant differences also existed in the amount and type of teacher control strategies, the amount of teacher retreating, and the amount of student time-on-task in the two types of classrooms. Examining these differences will show how life within the same school building can be very different for specific teachers and their students depending on the climate that exists in each classroom on a day to day basis.

There were major differences between the way strong and needs improvement teachers interacted with their students when managing their behavior. To illustrate this major difference, in 37% of the observations, needs improvement teachers used normative control to manage students' behavior from 21 or more times. That is, children were told to stop talking, sit down, open your books, sit up straight, and get busy numerous times throughout a typical 40 minute observation period. When the students failed to comply with directives, the needs improvement teachers', at times, appeared to beg and plead with them to focus on the task at hand. Finally, as teachers grew more frustrated, they resorted to coercion in an attempt to get the students to behave. For example, teachers moved students' tokens on a behavior chart, sent them out of the classroom, threatened to take away recess or other privileges, and even threatened to call a parent. Although

all teachers, at times, must ask students to behave and take away privileges as appropriate, the climates of these classrooms were characterized by an abundance of this type of behavior.

Conversely, teachers categorized as strong only interrupted instruction to use normative control from 21 or more times during 11% of the visits. In fact, the needs improvement teachers were using these control strategies *almost three and a half times* as often as the strong teachers. Interestingly, the strong teachers controlled student behavior with rewards significantly more often than the needs improvement teachers. For example, strong teachers used concrete (such as tokens) or verbal rewards to praise students in front of the whole class when desired behaviors were exhibited. In one classroom, students were given *pony dollars* each time the teacher noticed they were following procedures. On other occasions, teachers simply used verbal reinforcements such as "Thank you for following directions." On an average visit, these teachers used praise and rewards four times more often than needs improvement teachers.

As discussed earlier, teachers are said to retreat when they fail to respond to students who misbehave after they have been told to stop. During 50% of the visits, teachers categorized as needs improvement exhibited retreating behaviors more than five times; those rated as strong retreated over five times during only 2% of the visits. Thus, when teachers retreat, they create an environment that is not conducive to learning. This cycle, the elephant in the classroom, is difficult to control and

is something all teachers strive to avoid.

It should come as no surprise that the students in the needs improvement teachers' classrooms spent significantly less time on task than the students in strong teachers' classrooms. On average, 90% or more of the students were found to be on-task only 30% of the time in the classrooms of the teachers categorized as needs improvement. In contrast, we found that on average, 90% or more of the students were on-task 73% of the time in the classrooms of teachers categorized as strong. This decrease of time-on-task may be explained, in part, by additional data indicating that as the amount of time spent managing student behavior increased, the amount of time teachers spent on instruction decreased. Teachers categorized as strong spent significantly more time keeping students on task by asking questions, answering student questions, and providing feedback which is further evidence that increases in behavior management problems tend to decrease opportunities for teaching and learning.

#### **Implications for Classroom Practice**

Research has shown that managing the classroom effectively is one of a teacher's most important tasks (Marzano & Marzano, 2003). It is imperative that teacher candidates and experienced teachers connect classroom practices with the findings from current research and existing literature regarding effective management strategies. The following suggestions come from the researchers' observations of the strong teachers in this study and are supported by current literature.

*Be alert and quickly redirect off-task behaviors.* The researchers noted that the strong teachers were alert to what students in their classrooms were doing and quickly re-engaged off-task students before problems could occur. Kounin (1970), a pioneer in the study of classroom management, referred to this teaching trait as *withitness*. Strong teachers demonstrated *withitness* in this study; for example, they used a strategy recommended by Good and Brophy (2003) by scanning the classroom continuously and making eye contact with students as they taught to prevent problems before they could erupt. Strong teachers in this study also often controlled classroom environment through seating arrangements and small group make-up to avoid placing students in stressful situations and to create a positive learning environment. Moreover, these teachers moved throughout the classroom at times purposely placing themselves near students who were easily distracted during instruction. Marzano, Gaddy, Foseid, Foseid, Marzano (2009) stressed the importance of these types of preventive measures and referred to these strategies as *forecasting problems* in their research.

*Avoid retreating.* Strong teachers rarely retreated when students did not comply with stated rules and teacher requests. In Schelchty's (1976) early research in the sociology of education, he based the concept of retreating on the research of the renowned sociologist Amitai Etzioni (1968) focusing on control in social communities. As applied to teaching, if the teacher retreats from the role of leader in the classroom, a student or students will

take over the direction that the group takes. Strong teachers in this study employed the approaches Hunt, Wiseman, & Touzel (2009) suggested in order to avoid retreating. They used behavior controls only when student behavior was harmful or disruptive; they observed students to see that directives were being followed; they exhibited a calm confidence; and they avoided confrontations in front of the class.

Strong teachers rarely used threatening comments, such as, "Don't make me tell you this again."; "I have told you four times not to do that;" and "If I have to tell you this again, you will lose recess." Finally, strong teachers waited for students to comply for example during one observation a student was told to open his book and put his finger on the correct line on the page. The teacher paused, watching while the student complied, and then continued with the experience; this practice is also recommended by Marzano, Gaddy, Foseid, Foseid, Marzano (2009).

*Appropriately use praise and rewards.* Although the study of the effects of praising students who are exhibiting on-task behavior are mixed (Rathvon, 1990; Rosenberg, Sindelar, & Stedt, 1985; Amato-Zech, Off, & Doepke, 2006), it should be noted that the strong teachers in this study used significantly more praise and rewards and significantly fewer threatening and punishing behaviors. It seems reasonable to suggest this research supports the findings of Brophy (2004) who, in a summary of research, concluded that children's developmental outcomes improve when teacher-student interactions were characterized by warmth, sensitivi-

ty, and emotional support. Since the classroom is a social setting, the impact of giving appropriate, sincere praise and rewards in front of the entire group should never be underestimated. When students earn praise and perhaps a reward, the other students clearly notice and are more likely to exhibit the behaviors they see the teacher rewarding. The other students clearly notice, and a ripple effect occurs when these students exhibit the rewarded behaviors (Kounin, 1970). Something as simple as saying, "Thank you for making a wise choice," may have a powerful impact on every student in the classroom.

*Be aware of pacing and keep children engaged.* It is important to remember that busy, engaged children who are on-task and working toward meeting an instructional goal have much less time to misbehave. Teachers categorized as strong were more aware of pacing and kept children engaged by asking questions, answering questions, and giving feedback. Literature suggests that providing students numerous opportunities to interact with each other, to explore materials, to generate questions or answers to questions, and to participate in class discussions occurred in classrooms where students were on-task (Pate-Clevenger, Dusing, Houck & Zuber, 2008; Gupta, 2004; Mueller & Fleming, 2001; Baugous & Bendery, 2000).

In order to benefit from these suggestions, teacher candidates and experienced teachers alike must have the opportunity to take part in both personal and collaborative reflection about their own classroom practice. These reflections will give both teacher candidates and practicing teachers

the opportunity to examine their classroom behavior as it relates to their professional dispositions and student learning. The opportunity to interact with other professionals is an important component of this reflective process. Feedback and questions from the university supervisor, the cooperating teacher, or a peer can facilitate positive changes in the way teachers and students interact in the classroom and ultimately to improve student achievement. We believe that the implications of this research will become helpful only when teachers focus reflections on their actual classroom performance to make realistic, data-driven decisions. McConnell, Lundeborg, Koehler, Urban-Lurain, Zhang, Mikeska, Parker, Zhang, & Eberhardt, (2008) reported that videotaped records of actual classroom behavior have proven to be helpful in this type of collaborative reflection.

### Conclusion

The intern, who shared her frustration about misbehavior interfering with her ability to teach, was very perceptive. The teachers discussed in this article who were classified as strong created classroom climates that fostered good teaching and student learning in an environment virtually free of multiple disruptions. This intern, who had what she referred to as an *elephant in her classroom*, was referring to the fact that she could not focus on teaching and her students could not focus on learning because of the cycle of 1) student misbehavior, 2) teacher's attempt to control misbehavior, 3) student persistence in continued misbehavior, 4) teacher retreat-

ing in frustration, and 5) an increase in student misbehavior. Future teachers and teachers alike would do well to model their practice on what we observed strong teachers doing: *being alert and redirecting off-task behaviors, avoiding retreating, using appropriate praise and rewards, and being aware of pacing and keeping children engaged.*

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